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ABSTRACT

Research studies trying to understand, predict, and control dropout from distance education display various points of view and quite a few build on one another at a conceptual level, but their findings are rarely generalizable outside the situations in which the research is conducted. Although academics claim that new work on dropout should be based on theory appropriate to distance education, dropout is a single symptom with multiple causes, and a deductive analysis based on almost any reasonable model (let alone a fully-developed theory) is likely to explain only a small portion of dropout. An inductive approach (such as the use of grounded theory) might produce more practical information about dropouts even if it did not clarify theoretical issues in distance education. A review of the existing literature suggests that, besides the negative implications, dropout can be a healthy choice for a mobile or independent learner. Such a review raises a number of unanswered questions about dropouts in positive and negative circumstances and takes the researcher into the broader social context of education where theory from such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, political science, or economics (rather than psychology or curriculum design) might prove meaningful. By using these new frameworks to examine the nature of discourse of dropout in distance education, researchers may recognize ways to reconceptualize the problem and collect data that will speak less from the registrar's point of view and more about the experience of students. (41 references) (GL)

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THE DISCOURSE OF DROPOUT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION: A THEORETICAL ANALYSIS

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A. Overview of the Problem

Many researchers have worked hard to understand, predict and control dropout from distance education. Their studies display various points of view and quite a few build on one another at a conceptual level, but their findings are rarely generalizable outside the situations in which the research is conducted. This is frustrating. It also has implications beyond the complaint that conflicting operational definitions of dropout make it impossible to draw comparisons between institutions.

Persistently high rates of what the British sometimes call "wastage" worry administrators, course designers, and tutors who are separated from the students they seek to serve. In pressured growth situations where course and program evaluation is often haphazard and delayed, or completely ignored, dropout rates are read as an indication of student approval or disapproval. Practitioners ask for more research to help them make decisions. Thoughtful academics say that new work on dropout should be based on theory appropriate to distance education. While not yet "theory," a handful of conceptual models from this field of study merit testing. Using one or more of them in further dropout research would make sense, except for two things. First, dropout resembles automobile accidents or headache in that it is a single symptom with many possible causes. Second, because of this, deductive analysis based on almost any reasonable model is likely to explain some portion of the dropout without necessarily adding to our knowledge of the whole. An inductive approach to dropout (such as the use of grounded theory) would require researchers--ideally, many more than are now available--to gather and interpret the local detail from which knowledge was to be generated. This approach might produce practical information about dropouts even if it did not clarify theoretical issues in distance education. In either case, the findings of further research are unlikely to be more generalizable than those of existing studies.

What to do? With no intuitively obvious general theoretical base, the next best thing might be to ask basic questions about the existing research. The purpose of this paper is to map the conceptual limits and growing edges of the discourse of dropout in distance education. It identifies places where the existing literature seems illogical and other places where it seems to move into potentially fruitful ways of thinking.

B. The Literature of Dropout in Distance Education

It would be convenient if the discourse of dropout fell into several categories--such as research associated with student learning style, or with factors under the control of the distance teaching institutions, or with broad social issues. The literature includes these perspectives but it often blends them

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together. What follows is an attempt to depict the concerns of a large and rather murky body of knowledge.

Typically, it is numbers which speak: much of the discourse of dropout in Britain, North America, Sweden, Australia, and elsewhere is based on descriptive statistics that employ regression analysis. Often, these are variations of Tinto's (1975*) path model. They use records of enrollment, assignment completion, turn-around time, tutor or telephone contacts, and grading kept by the larger institutions or accumulated through readily coded, ex-post facto surveys. Tinto's model was developed for university freshmen living in residence and a major variable in it is social integration, something that needs to be operationalized for distance education research in rather tenuous ways. There is a whiff of opportunism to this kind of research--or, perhaps more accurately, a sense of harbouring raw numbers that beg to be cooked up.

The distance education dropout is often seen as a victim of personal or social stress, or of institutional failure. The student is thought of as participating in a broader context which influences his or her study behaviour (Dahllof, 1977, 1984; Willen, 1981, 1983, 1984). A number of discussions focus on some form of student aptitude /teaching application /student performance analysis. This approach sees the important interaction between learners and the teaching institution as a problem of "getting the mixture right" or matching teaching approach with learning style. They look at the student's motivation for enrolling (Coldeway & others, 1980; Sewart, 1983; Sweet, 1986), style of learning (Moore, 1976; Thompson, 1984), and personality type (Masson, 1987). Other investigations recognize student need for prompt feedback (Rekkedal, 1985; Bartels & Willen, 1985) in the mixture of face-to-face meetings, teleconferencing, audio or video presentations, tutor contact and written correspondence work within a course (Daniel & Marquis, 1983; Flink, 1978; Scales, 1984; Roberts, 1984; van Enckevort, 1986; Garrison, 1987). Several "Research and Evaluation of Distance Education for the Adult Learner" studies track students at Athabasca University and check the relationship between learner attributes, instructional treatments, and student performance (Coldeway & others, 1980). One major study included the factor of the difficulty of written materials (Chacon-Duque, 1985). The products of these studies are often compounded variables that become significant predictors for a reasonable amount of the dropout, but these factors are local in their application.

Similar kinds of quantitative work involve attempts, based on Rekkedal's (1973) study on turn-around time, to replicate some of his findings and compare dropout across institutions (Bartels & Willen, 1985; Taylor et al, 1986). Anxiety about the lack of

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inter-institutional standards for what is measured as completion rates, dropout, or persistence crops up frequently (Wong, 1987).

Siqueira de Freitas and Lynch (1986) suggest that noninstitutional variables account for the largest proportion of variance of student completion rates at Venezuela's open university where rates of persistence increased with enhanced counselling and learning centres. Rekkedal (1985) introduced the "personal tutor" in the system of distance education with good results, and Daloz (1986) described a successful strategy of mentoring for adult students, some of whom were taking distance courses.

Researchers agree that, although dropout has received more attention than any other aspect of distance education (Garrison, 1987; Rekkedal, 1985), it remains a difficult and perplexing problem (van Enckevort, 1986; Bartels & Peters, 1986; Woodley & Parlett, 1983). Garrison (1987) is not alone in his desire for dropout research based on a distance education conceptual model or theory that has explanatory and predictive validity. Despite the lack of good research in distance education (Moore, 1985) and the lack of fully evolved and tested theory, there are useful theoretical models. Approaches to distance education dropout that derive in part from Holmberg's (1985) "theory" or concept of guided didactic conversation are outlined by Roberts (1984) and Garrison (1987). Peters' (1971) "theory" of distance education as an industrialized form of education and Sewart's (1983) articulted concern with communication and interaction between students and teachers are also identified by Roberts (1984) as sources for a conceptual model.

Explanations for distance education dropout behaviour flowing from adult education research are associated with the delineation of "old" or "new" barriers to participation at the individual (student), the institutional, or the societal level (Rubenson, 1986; van Enckevort, 1986). This perspective tells a cultural story from a point of view sympathetic to the student trapped first by reproduction of the status quo and secondly by the use of new media. From a similar social perspective, Goodridge and Layne (1984) consider academic persistence in the context of democratization of higher education. In countries where distance education holds democratization of education as a primary goal, high percentages of "wastage" raise the fear that the "open door" is really a "revolving door" which rapidly returns disadvantaged students to the outside (Harris, 1987). Harris (1987) uses critical theory to analyze openness and closure in distance education and, while doing so, sees dropout in terms of social class conflict.

Not all distance education seeks to be open education; in Germany, the FernUniversitat only enrolls students who pass their university entrance exams, and even then expects many to drop difficult courses as proof that its graduates belong to an intellectual elite (Bartels & Peters, 1986; Bartels & Willen, 1985). In third world countries distance education universities serve another kind of elite--those upwardly mobile in their work environments. The huge Universitas Sains Malaysia only enrolls

students who are employed and who have permission from their employers to study.

While it is usual to view students who do not complete a course as victims--following the dominant trend of Sewart, Holmberg, Dahllof, Willen, Rekkedal, Rubenson and others who have seen the distance education student as dependent on the teaching institution to provide guidance and support--another perspective comes from the work of Moore (1972-1986) and Peters (1971). Moore's model of independent study and telemathic teaching and Peter's concept of the industrial nature of distance education emphasize the discretion of the student to purchase and use the educational product in a variety of ways to suit personal purposes. Autonomy and distance--in Moore's perception--range from high to low and produce a full cube of locations possibly occupied by students and by courses. Dropouts from high autonomy locations might be independent learners, efficient about accomplishing their learning objectives. Far from being victims, such dropouts might quit cumbersome courses in order to facilitate their learning goals. This is a point of view often held by course writers or course designers but rarely spoken of in the literature.

In dropout studies from higher education (mainly of American, campus-based, freshmen) it is recognized that students who are mobile enough to transfer from one institution to another appear as dropouts from the first (Pascarella & Chapman, 1983). Mobility is yet another way of viewing dropout. There is some basis for seeing distance education students as generally upwardly mobile in terms of social class: most of the OU's students typically held middle class jobs, but 51% come from working class parents (Harris, 1987). Even more striking figures would likely come from third world countries.

In summary, then: dropouts occur for many reasons and could be seen as scattered along an axis with positive and negative poles. In its negative range, dropout resembles headache--a symptom associated with many different calamities and ills. More positively, dropout can be a healthy choice for a mobile or independent learner. Unanswered questions about dropouts in positive or negative circumstances--What do they do after they dropout? Have they accomplished their own goals? What impact did the distance education experience have on them? and so on--beg for investigation. These questions take the researcher into the broader social context of education where theory from such disciplines as sociology, anthropology, political science or economics (rather than psychology or curriculum design) might prove meaningful.

C. Instrumental Utility of Dropout Research

Practical questions at the "micro" or ground level could still be answered in terms of particular student bodies and specific courses. Few distance teaching institutions know what their dropout statistics really mean in terms of student use of their materials and the degree of student satisfaction or dissatisfaction with their courses or programs. Such information is crucial in order to justify programs to funding agencies. And

it is important that course designers and writers know what is effective in terms of teaching and communicating through different media. Few institutions can say exactly who their students are, how they came to distance education, what they want from such courses, how they study, why they may take only one or a whole series of courses, what the institution's public image is. Distance educators need a more intimate understanding of the processes of education in the many modes--from television to personal tutoring--in which they may teach. The problem of getting the mixture right must be solved again and again. What do students want--more independence and choice, shorter courses, flexibility, less emphasis on higher education credit and transferability and more on practicing skills? Or, do they seek more structure and instruction, more tutor interactions, longer courses, interdisciplinary courses, more assignments with more marking before marks "count," ways to identify socially with the institution, group work? While multiple realities surely co-exist, knowledge about which of these will likely affect a particular situation would help those whose job it is to design distance education. Such information would likely allow for the reduction of wastage--or the more negative kinds of dropout.

D. For the Sake of Argument

Another constant factor involved with dropout is completion of written assignments to demonstrate the student's learning since that is the index commonly used to determine whether or not a student in persisting. Do most adults like to do assignments? How else might students complete the educational feedback loop and the teaching institution demonstrate that it is doing a good job? Do students who drop out without completing any or all the assignments learn from the course and judge the experience as "educational"? Distance education is largely an information management process which, in itself, gives rise to questions about what is being measured by the usual assessment of course completions. Perhaps distance education is the purest form of adult education, in which all the best "andragogical" ideas should be employed to elicit rather than bank such knowledge as might empower its students. Knowledge, luckily, is unlike money in that the model for increasing its distribution is not the benevolent thievery of Robin Hood so much as it is the parable of the loaves and fishes. Hope is the underlying commodity of distance education--hope of improving one's lot. Liberation is the root motivation for many who embark on its programs--liberation from the constraints of their economic and social circumstances or their educational decisions thus far.

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